DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 685 SO 020 840

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TITLE The Enigmatic Savior of the Union: Abraham Lincoln.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 18p.; For a related document, see SO 020 841.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Biographies; Civil War (United States); *Presidents of the United States; Social Studies; United States History; Units of Study
IDENTIFIERS *Lincoln (Abraham)

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The Enigmatic Savior of the Union: Abraham Lincoln

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Abstract

Abraham Lincoln rose from the depths of obscurity to guide the United States successfully through the turbulent and menacing years of the Civil War. Laborer, businessman, postmaster, politician, and lawyer were some of the vocations, not all successful, that Lincoln tried during the years leading to his ascent to the Presidency. This review of the literature gives a historical overview of the life of Lincoln as elucidated by the sources cited, an overview which may be useful to educators or others seeking a broad perspective on the life of this famous American.

The Enigmatic Savior of the Union: Abraham Lincoln

On Good Friday, April 14, 1865, a fanatical Southerner named John Wilkes Booth, unchallenged, approaches the President's box at the Ford Theater, stealthily opens the door, fires a single shot at close range into the head of Abraham Lincoln, and leaps to the stage below, escaping in the ensuing confusion. "A look of unmistakable peace"--according to his secretary--comes over Lincoln's careworn face shortly after 7:00 the next morning, and Stanton issues his famous epitaph, "Now he belongs to the ages" (Ridley, 1944, p. 204).

A great American had died.

How did it come to pass? How did this enigmatic man--a paradoxical blend of strength and frailty, skepticism and faith, rationality and emotion--rise to be head of the nation and, ultimately, the savior of the Union?

Ironically, Abraham Lincoln was a Southerner by birth. Born February 12, 1809, in a log cabin two miles from Hodgensville, Kentucky, he was named after his grandfather, who had been a captain of Virginia militia (Ridley, 1944).

Lincoln's father, Thomas Lincoln, was a hard worker but never much of a success, moving from place to place. Thomas married Nancy Hanks, a neighborhood girl, in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, in 1806. Nancy, the opposite of Thomas, was somber, withdrawn, self-sacrificing, and deeply religious (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

In December of 1816, Thomas gave up on Kentucky, selling his farm and buying land in Perry County, Indiana, where the Lincolns lived for 14 years. During their first winter there, the family existed with only a makeshift cabin, 14 feet wide and open on one side. Milk sickness, for which there was no cure, claimed the life of Nancy in October of 1818; Thomas, a respectable carpenter, built the coffin himself with Abraham whittling the pegs to hold it together (Handlin and Handlin, 1980).

Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children of her own, was Thomas' next bride, bringing both an atmosphere of refinement and love for all of the chidren to the cabin. Death was always close at hand for the Lincolns--with the dangers including Indians, sickness, and wild animals. Although the Lincolns never had many chances to go to church, they considered themselves to be good Christians (Thomas, although Southern, opposed human bondage of any kind). As a matter of fact, Thomas helped begin and build the

Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Fleeing an outbreak of milk sickness, Thomas sold his farm in November of 1829 for $125.00 and moved to Illinois with the family, settling west of Decatur (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Abraham's early education was mostly at his own initiative. In all his life he spent only about four months in actual formal schooling; as a matter of fact, in his early days he said, "My best friend is the man who'll git me a book I ain't read" (Ridley, 1944, p. 21). Reading widely and voraciously at every opportunity, he made the Bible a staple, since it was frequently the only book available. Dilworth's Speller, Aesop's Fables ("A house divided against itself is brought to desolation."), Robinson Crusoe, The Arabian Nights, and Weem's Life of Washington (the book most fondly remembered by Lincoln later) were other favorites. Although he read Pope, Gray, Milton, and Shakespeare, Lincoln's favorite poet was Robert Burns, much of whose poetry he memorized (Handlin and Handlin, 1980).

Tall, gangling, and strong as any two ordinary men, Abraham could hold an axe handle tip straight out at arm's length, but he compensated for his awkwardness by storytelling, mimicry, and joking. Moody, shy, and deferential on the surface, he was

hard working and fun loving (Handlin & Handlin, 1980). He was six-feet, four inches tall, with steady eyes below a broad forehead, a firm and sensitive mouth, and both jaw and cheekbones granitelike in nature (Ridley, 1944).

By now Abe had decided that the back-breaking work of these early years was not for him; at the age of 22, he left the farm for good and decided to try his luck in New Salem (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Lincoln had a variety of experiences prior to his turning to the law profession--many of which were not very successful. He got into debt through a partnership (with William F. Berry) in a store that failed; he served in the Black Hawk War (which earned him $125 and an Iowa land claim); appointed postmaster of New Salem in May, 1833, he decided to become a surveyor (basically after training himself) after the post office was closed in 1836. A number of his failures would cause him still to be repaying debt in 1848: (a) a scheme to run a steamboat up the Sangamon River (the promoter disappeared); (b) the fact that he had cosigned on several mortgage agreements (which were defaulted by the principal signers); (c) the partnership in the store mentioned earlier; and (d) the fact that he had borrowed even to purchase his surveying equipment (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Deciding to become a self-taught lawyer, Lincoln borrowed Blackstone's Commentaries, Chitty's Pleadings, Greenleaf's Evidence, and Story's Equity. After studying these, he became a law partner with John T. Stuart in March, 1837. Later, he was law partners with Stephen T. Logan for nine years before striking out on his own. In 1844 William Hearndon, a novice lawyer, became Abe's junior law partner. Lincoln's strength as a lawyer was his address to the jury, which he put in terms that they could easily understand (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

During his law career he visited the courtrooms of Metamora, Peoria, Tremont, Beardstown, Bloomington, Mount Pulaski, and other spots from Chicago to Cairo; he argued 3,000 cases in all, 250 before the Illinois Supreme Court, and two before the U.S. Supreme Court (Long, 1989). Using a form of primitive psychology in picking jurors, Lincoln thought (a) that a fat man was the ideal juror, (b) that blond, blue-eyed men (too nervous) should be avoided, and (c) that men with high foreheads (their minds were already made up) or older men should not be chosen (Long, 1989).

Lincoln's love life was a strange mix. Surprisingly, he almost married Mary Owen (whom he did not want to marry) in 1831, but she rejected him and moved back to Kentucky. The daughter of a wealthy and

prominent Kentucky family, Mary Todd of Lexington, Kentucky, moved to Springfield in the fall of 1839. Lincoln was almost 30 and Mary almost 20 when they met. They were engaged at the end of 1840; however, he was snubbed by her relatives in his desire to marry her, lapsing into a bout of depression and an attack of hypochondria, which had afflicted him in the past and would recur (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

A year and one half after the engagement had ended, Mary and Lincoln met again and later decided to marry despite the opposition from her family; they were married on November 4, 1842 (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Ironically, Lincoln was almost involved in a duel with State Auditor James Shields when he took responsibility for some disparaging material that Mary and a friend had written anonymously to the Sangamo Journal; only the last minute intervention of Mary's cousin precluded the violence (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Their home for the first year was a rented room at the Globe Tavern (Robert Todd, their first child, was born there in August, 1843). Although Lincoln had his periods of depression and she had her occasional headaches and fits of hysteria, they complimented each other well: She was fastidious about their homes and both of their appearances; he was dependable and

solid. Later in life they called each other "Father" and "Mother" (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Eventually, they rented a small three-room frame house and later, with some financial assistance from her father, they bought the Springfield home of the Episcopal minister who had married them (Handlin & Handlin, 1980). The 17 years that Lincoln spent with his wife and four sons at the Springfield home before his election to the Presidency were probably the happiest of his entire life. There Lincoln had a four-poster mahogany bed to accommodate his lanky frame (Hayes, 1987). Both Lincoln and Mary doted on their children; Lincoln sometimes took them to his law office, driving his law partner Hearndon to a frenzy because of their unmanageable behavior. Although he loved his wife, Lincoln sometimes found it difficult to be around her and frequently left the house early and ate his breakfast at the office; because she was terrified of thunderstorms, Lincoln hurried home to comfort her whenever one occurred. Mary bore him three more sons: Eddie (1846), who died at the age of 4; Willie (1850); and Thomas (1853) (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Lincoln throughout his life occasionally dabbled in poetry; the following effort was brought about by the memory of a visit to the old home in 1844 and to

the grave of Nancy Hanks two years later (Handlin & Handlin, 1980, p. 67):

"O death! Thou awe-inspiring prince,
That keepest the world in fear;
Why does thou tear more blest ones hence,
And leave him ling'ring here?"

Lincoln's political career had some inauspicious beginnings: (a) In 1832 he ran for the state legislature at the age of 23 and finished 8th in a field of 13; (b) in 1834 he ran again and finished 2nd in a field of 13 with four seats available; (c) in 1836 Lincoln won a third term, leading a field of 17 candidates; (d) re-elected in 1838, he failed to be elected as the Whig candidate for Speaker of the House because his party lacked a majority; (e) although on November 7, 1854, he won election to the state legislature as an anti-Nebraska Whig, he really wanted a seat in the U.S. Senate, so he resigned (since no member of a state legislature could run for the Senate), losing the Senate race, but accepting it in good spirits; (f) in June, 1855, he was the unsuccessful aspirant for the Republican Vice-Presidential nomination; (g) in 1858, he defeated Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat; (h) on May 18, 1860, he was nominated as the Republican Presidential candidate in Chicago; and (i) the Presidency became

Lincoln's when he defeated Breckinridge, Douglas, and Bell with 180 electoral votes out of 303 (Dineen, 1965; Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Lincoln's first term in office proved to be a time of peril for the Union. Douglas proved to be right in his prediction of the consequences of Lincoln's election as President: In December of 1860, South Carolina led the way by seceding and forced Lincoln, three months before his inauguration, to consider the difficult and arduous task of the restoration of the Union. A summation of some of the major events of Lincoln's first term include the following: (a) Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as president of the Confederate States of America; (b) by March of 1861 General Scott had received more than 300 letters threatening Lincoln, and there had been an assassination plot in Baltimore; (c) Lincoln decided to send supply ships to the beleaguered Ft. Sumter, but on April 12 rebel fire forced Sumter to surrender, effectively starting the Civil War; (d) after a second defeat at Bull Run plunged Lincoln into despair, a victory at Antietam (September, 1862) did not prove the knockout blow that Lincoln had hoped would destroy the Confederate army under Robert E. Lee; (e) on September 22, 1862, the Emancipation Proclamation proclaimed all slaves to be free as of January 1, 1863; and (f) Lincoln helped to dedicate a military

cemetery at Gettysburg (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

On November 19, 1863, America's sixteenth President was in town to make "a few appropriate remarks" (Holzer, 1983, p. 37) at the dedication of a cemetery at Gettysburg for Union soldiers killed in the Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863. The human toll of the battle had been tremendous--more than 46,000 Union and Confederate soldiers either dead, wounded, or missing. Ironically, Lincoln almost didn't make the trip: The invitation issued to him had been lukewarm; his son Tad was gravely ill; and Lincoln was not even the featured speaker. After Everett, the main speaker, spoke for 1 hour and 57 minutes, Lincoln spoke approximately 271 words. Although Lincoln had doubts about the worth of his speech, Harper's Weekly called it " . . . the most perfect piece of American eloquence" (Holzer, 1986, p. 43).

The election of 1864 approached with some Democratic newspapers predicting harm to Lincoln if he were elected to a second term; although hundreds of threatening letters crossed his desk, Lincoln led an open life which was largely unprotected and exposed. Lincoln, fifty-six-years-old by the time he took office for the second time, had aged visibly and looked worn and haggard.

Lincoln's health seemed to be failing, and while rumors of abduction and assassination were rampant in the capital, Stanton assigned extra guards to protect Lincoln (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Lincoln's religious beliefs, if somewhat unorthodox, had grown stronger, more deeply held, over the years. As mentioned previously, Lincoln grew up with the Bible although he steadfastly refused to join a church (leading to charges of Deism that he could easily have avoided). He called his faith "Necessity"--an almost fatalistic acceptance of the limits of human power (Handlin & Handlin, 1980). Personal tragedy struck in 1862 when both Willie and Tad came down with fevers; Tad survived, but Willie died on February 20. Consequently, Mary suffered a nervous breakdown; thereafter, Lincoln spoke of God more intimately and in a more personal way. Lincoln had once said, "Take all of the Bible upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith . . . " (Dineen, 1965, p. 83). Although some biographies of Lincoln tend to portray his religious convictions as a mere sham solely for public consumption, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that Lincoln was deeply and sincerely religious (Noll, 1985).

Throughout his life, Lincoln maintained his sense of humor. In 1863 when both he and Tad came down with

what the doctors termed smallpox, Lincoln at last felt that he could satisfy everyone when he quipped, "Where are the office seekers now?" (Handlin & Handlin, 1980, p. 163). After being accused in a debate with Stephen Douglas of being two-faced, Lincoln responded, "If I had another face, do you think that I'd wear this one?" (Holzer, 1983, p. 57).

Lincoln had had a premonition of death in 1864. While stretched out on his bed awaiting the results of the election, he had looked into the mirror and had seen two images of his face, one gaunt and very haggard. After telling Mary, she, totally shaken, interpreted the vision to mean that Lincoln would be elected to two terms but not live out the second (Handlin & Handlin, 1980).

Mary's unhappy interpretation proves to be tragically correct on April 14, 1865.

John Wilkes Booth approaches the Presidential box, derringer in hand. A shot rings out; the sixteenth President lies mortally wounded on the floor.

Abraham Lincoln, who cried as an infant when his nine-year-old cousin held him, prompting Dennis Hanks to say disappointedly, "He'll never come to much" (Ridley, 1944, p. 15), was dead, having played out his crucial role in the nation's dramatic history.

A former slave at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, expressed the reverent feelings of Negroes for Lincoln after his assassination (Dineen, 1965, p. 33):

"He is gone out of glory to glory,
A smile with the tear may be shed.
Oh, then let us tell the sweet story--
Triumphantly, Lincoln is dead."

The Reverend John E. Todd provided the following tribute to Lincoln (Dineen, 1965, p. 94): "[His] grave faults [were] over-leniency and generosity, deliberation and patience--faults which would have been excellences in less desperate times, and which even in these times have probably been our salvation."

Lincoln truly does belong to the ages.

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